

First Church Pulpit

**"WHY PEOPLE DRINK — AND WHY
THEY DRINK TOO MUCH"**

Text: "The old has passed away, behold the new
has come." — (II Corinthians 5:17)



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

401 SOUTHEAST FIFTEENTH AVENUE
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA 33301

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RICHARD M. CROMIE, Minister

Our sermon topic today is "Why People Drink - And Why They Drink Too Much". I pose it as one of the most important moral problems facing our nation. And while I do not condemn those of you who drink, and while I am not a hellfire and damnation preacher on this subject (My Dad used to tell me that I should have been), still, from the Christian pulpit, and may I say especially in Fort Lauderdale, some strong pastoral word on the evils of excessive drinking is mandatory.

Do I need to make the case, really? A part of it is in the statistics of it all. A minimum of 28 million Americans have a serious drinking problem. Ten million job-related accidents every year... twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand traffic deaths (young people many times), are attributed directly to alcohol, or at least its abuse. Twenty-five percent, one doctor estimated in the New England Journal, of all hospital admissions are related to the excessive use of alcohol, and according to a recent study, I assume it is true, forty percent of all those who go to emergency care centers; seventy percent of boating accidents and fatalities have been, at least in one study, directly related to the excessive use of alcohol. Eighty-five percent of fatalities of this nation's fire-related difficulties are attributed to alcohol; and maybe, saddest of all, seventy-five percent of child abuse is related to alcohol and drugs.

Beyond those and many other statistics, however, there are an untold trillion

stories at least of broken hearts and broken lives and broken homes. It is really very sad. I don't really have to make a case, do I? That there is an alarming increase in the use of alcohol among the young and the old, for 3.5 million of those 28 millions with serious drinking problems are beyond retirement age, and 3.3 million are teenagers. Normally those who drink excessively do not live that long, but three million five hundred thousand of them have. And, as women's liberation becomes an issue in other places, it is sad to tell you that there has been a 35% increase of members of Alcoholics Anonymous (At least they are there for treatment) in females over the past ten years. It is especially worrisome for those in child-bearing years, for it will not be long until a notice similar to that on every pack of cigarettes will be put on every bottle of alcohol: "Warning -- Particularly dangerous to an unborn child."

And, it is everywhere...right? We think of it as Skid Row, I mean those poor bums who don't know how to handle booze - but it is in the highest, finest places of the land, too. It is throughout the Bible. Noah celebrated so much with his wine, he became drunk and disgraced himself. "Wine is a mocker and beer is a brawler. Whoever is lead astray by them is unwise", it says in Proverbs; and Isaiah says: "Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and who champion themselves as mixers of strong drinks."

Now, do not be alarmed. Most of you who know me at all, know that I drink.

I am not preaching from this pulpit "teetotalism", though many of you would like to have me do that. But the tentacles of this alcohol problem, let us call it, are far-reaching. I was at a conference not too long ago, where two hundred people were present. We have four times that here this morning. And by statistical average, the leader of the conference said (Now relax, this is funny...), he said: "Fifteen of you by statistical average have an excessive drinking problem... Will you stand up?" Well, he had picked the fifteen, you know, in advance, but he said, one stood up that he never picked. (Don't worry, I am not going to ask you to do that!) And then he said: "But those fifteen of you, statistically, probably are married, and have at least one child, or did, so reach out and take two more. Now there would be forty-five people standing up, right?" And he said: "Well, you forty-five probably have a job, friends at school, and people you work with, and acquaintances of one sort or another, so each of you take four more." You know, they ran out of people. Everyone was affected by the problem.

Now, if you are thinking with me, and we are getting more to the heart of what I want to say this morning (How to cure alcoholism is a sermon or two all by itself), I have a very specific objective. And that is to help you to think with me about the question: "Why?" Why is it that perfectly sane people will destroy themselves with alcohol? Why is it that a young husband, with a great career ahead of him, and

a wonderful wife, will all of a sudden dive into a bottle and stay there? Why will that same young wife, maybe in response and maybe not, with responsibilities for children, or a position of her own, why will she join him?

St. Paul in Romans 7 says a very interesting thing. I don't know if anyone knows the answer to this question, but Paul says it this way: "I cannot understand my own actions. I end up doing the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. The evil I do not want is what I do." We all know how he feels, right? At least some of the time. If you have ever done anything dumb (Have you?), then you know what St. Paul is talking about.

Well, let us start an answer to the question, but my primary purpose is not to answer it for you, but to spark you to think it through in understanding yourself, others in your home, and what is now a universal problem of our nation. There is no easy answer.

First, serious researchers are now pointing to the relationship which genetics might have, that is, the inherited tendency at least toward excessive use of alcohol and drugs. That is a very complicated procedure, if you understand genetic pre-conditioning. It does not work that simply anywhere. No trait is just automatically inherited. It comes into the potential stage, and then as that

light develops in a particular social setting, it can indeed blossom and flourish, and normally where drink is in a home, the next generation takes on drinking. Not always, of course. My grandfather was an alcoholic. Of the four sons he had, two were (As my father) "teetotalers". They never touched a drink, but the two others drank too much. So, it is very complicated, but there does seem to be a tendency toward what we call in genetics the pre-conditioning within a certain family or social setting to alcoholism. Not automatic, I underline and repeat, but the tendency is there.

Alcoholics Anonymous, the organization which, in my opinion, is by far and away the expert in the field, will attribute the disease sometimes to a basic allergy, as it were, in the body chemistry. And there are some people, it is known, who literally cannot handle alcohol. We are committed to realize that other types of mental and emotional illness are in the same field, but the chemical components of the body certainly have something to do with the disease.

Are you with me? It is a way of saying something...not to excuse those who drink excessively, because as I later will say, many times it is indeed out of their control. It is a way though of trying to understand that there is more involved than just saying: "It is stupid to drink, and you should not drink." (And it is stupid for sure.)

Well, we need to move along. There is a wonderful book, I recommend it to parents frequently, by Dr. Addeo and his wife joined together. It asks the question which is more difficult to understand: why do children drink? And this moves us away from this whole issue of genetics at this point. But 3.3 million teenagers (That is a lot of youngsters) are addicted to alcohol in our nation alone. He says (I wonder what you would say): young people drink out of curiosity. I mean, they just want to try it. It is so popular in our culture, it is available everywhere. They see their parents and their friends having a quote-unquote "good time", so why shouldn't they drink, too? A little girl called me from college about a year ago and said: "Everybody up here drinks! What am I supposed to do?" I said: "Remember where you came from, honey."

Well, they drink to hide their shyness, Dr. Addeo is saying; they drink (Are you listening?) because they are lonely. They drink because of the high it gives them, but I remember a boy who came down off the high of marijuana and said: "Everything is the same as it was before I went up." They drink to appear grown-up, right? They drink because (Dr. Addeo says this is Number One)... can you imagine it?: they drink because they are bored! They have no goals to speak of. No direction, no purpose, no power. So they drink.

Dr. Rosenthal of the famous Phoenix Rehabilitation Center, which originated first in New York City (Those of you

in the field will know about it) said:
"One of the most pathetic lines I have
ever read is: 'Every child who takes
a drink is asking for help'". The only
thing I can add is: so is every adult.
(Are you listening?)

Well, with all of that it is kind of
an introduction. I hope you were on
board for the most of it. Now stay
alive and alert here, don't fall asleep,
because I am to enumerate five things,
they are brief, that in my opinion
summarize everything I have said, and
what I am trying to say, and what I
hope you will take home with you. In
other words, I am going to present to
you these four reasons, and one little
conclusion, and then we will be done.

(1) I think, to be honest, the first
reason why people drink excessively
is that they are suffering from, I prefer
the word "sickness" rather than
"disease", but those in the field use
"disease". They are suffering from
a sickness of the body, mind or soul
to the point that it has gone so far
that they cannot simply choose not to
drink. And I repeat: don't try to tell
the drowning man who is out in the water
that he should not be there. Nobody
knows it better than he does. But that
does not help. Take that little analogy:
a friend of yours is drowning out in
the middle of a deep lake, and you can
yell out: "What on earth are you doing
there?!" Right? Or you can get into
a boat and go out and help him, or throw
a buoy or whatever. The point is made,
isn't it?

It really is demonic. And when Alcoholics Anonymous started in the Thirties, it ended up with twelve steps that I could recite for you if you wanted me to, but I want to list three of them, and then the twelfth, because they are so spiritual that it might give you some power.

This is the first reason why people drink: it is related to a sickness, a disease. Step One: "We admitted we are powerless and that our lives had become unmanageable." Two: "We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity." Three: "We made a decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of God as we understand Him." And on down to Step Twelve: "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we try to carry these messages to alcoholics and to practice those principles in the affairs of our lives."

Now, it is a disease. But I had a professor in counseling who used to say to us at the end of every term: "If you take a gun and put it to the head of an alcoholic, he'll quit drinking. You put a gun to the head of a man with cancer, and the cancer cells will not go away." So even in trying to understand the disease, we have to resurrect as spiritual people the will... and this is not only alcohol. Some of you will feel left out, I know. It is not your worry, except as, of course, it worries us all who work with young people and family problems. But it applies to everything else. The will and the power we need to overcome grief, and

loneliness, and boredom, and any problem comes out of the same source as the will and power to overcome excessive alcohol. All right? You believe that? Why not!

(2) Secondly, and this turns it entirely around, I think that most people who drink too much drink because it is just a stupid old habit. I used to smoke a lot years ago, and I would come out of a classroom, and light up a cigarette. Do you smoke? You know what I mean. After dinner, with a cup of coffee, light one up.... Every time you have a beer with the boys, light one up.... Getting off a streetcar, light a cigarette. Get into the car, light a cigarette. It is a stupid habit; and this takes it entirely out of the realm of disease, doesn't it? And then, the question becomes: Why do people who know all of these things are wrong, continue to pursue self-destructive behavior, whether it be excessive work, excessive food, excessive drink, excessive tobacco? Hmmm?

I mean, most people I know drink as a habit. And I am here to tell you the habit can be broken. And if I have no right to tell you that, a whole lot of other people within the sound of my voice do. You can overcome it, or that friend or family member you are praying for. But a habit is a habit, and habits can be bad, and habits can be stopped. And don't give me any malarkey about disease of the soul, when I have seen alcoholics stop. Maybe you need help. And many times it is the loving kindness and care of the

many institutions that are so well prepared to give you the love and support and affection, or that loved one you are talking about. Maybe you need that first, but it takes a matter of deciding who is boss of your life!

(3) Thirdly, I think people drink - this is odd - because they really lack self-esteem. And they think that by getting more drinks, looking big - this is largely a problem with young people, though not only - they are really trying to step up. It all starts in the army, some fellow told me, "Because we used to have a contest, and I used to win." It can start in college, in high school, with the boys on the street, on board ship in the Navy. It can start anywhere, but it is a lack of self-esteem that is buttressed by a prowess in consuming alcohol. Does that make any sense to you? And to create this impression that one is something one is not is simply soul-destroying.

(4) Fourthly, most people I know who drink too much drink to escape, plain and simple. Not being able to find some great meaning in their life, they go from north to south, from girl to girl, from boy to boy, from book to book, from chore to chore, even from church to church. The only problem is that the same person follows them around, and they never escape the problem. You cannot escape and boredom comes, and self-destruction comes. Once in a while the opposite happens, those who study it say. The man's done a good job all day long, by golly, he will go home and reward himself with a drink. "Honey, I was so good today,

I am going to have two." Or, if I have been perfect all day long and helped a thousand people, I'll have three. Did you get it? It is escaping. And while you cannot escape yourself, neither can you escape the Hound of Heaven, who never gives up on you at all. Young or old, the drinker turns to alcohol for comfort; for relief from frustration and failure; for escape from reality, and the worse the pressure, the worse the drinking gets. It really is a mini-suicide.

Hobart Mowher used to say (He was a great authority thirty years ago) that people drink excessively (Follow me, I'm almost done), even those who drink and have horrendous hangovers, because it proves to themselves that deep down they are not worth anything. And the next morning reassures them because they still hurt in the head; and no matter how successful they are, it does not count. It is what you think about yourself inside, where Jesus Christ can enter in and give you that power you need. That was the fourth: to escape, but you cannot. And out of that boredom, it only gets worse. And now we are right where we should be.

Think about Paul in II Corinthians 5, and leave alcohol behind. St. Paul says: "In Christ, I am a new creation. I find the power in Him to put everything else behind me that is unworthy of being called His child." You have to fill your life with something, right? Why fill it with booze, when you can fill it with Christ? Right? If you are an empty vessel, the Bible says, you have to fill your life with something; so do I. If anyone is in Christ, Paul says, he is new. The old has passed away.

So I say to the person who hears this, or might read it, who has a problem with alcohol: Don't give up hope. God never gives up on you. He is the Hound of Heaven and He has your scent, and He'll never stop coming after you... never. Your friends might give up on you; your wife might give up on you; your dad might give up on you; you might even give up on yourself. But God won't. He loved you so much He gave his only son that you and I might live.

And to the rest of us, whatever be the need, you can be sure you do not find the power on your own. Right? A friend told me once: "Every time I think I can do it, something goes wrong." It is the power that comes within you. You cannot spend your life in the corner of the garden, pretending God is not there, hiding from Him, can you? Just step out into the open and say: "Lord Jesus, it is me again. I am Richie Cromie (Put your name in), and without you, I cannot live another day. I'll fail without you." Bow your head and say it that way. (I know you'll go home and some of you will be saying: "Did I go to a revival tent, or to the First Presbyterian Church?") Bow your head, will you please, and just say: "Lord Jesus, it is me again. I don't know what all my problems are, but I know I have too many for me. And so, drop your still dew of quietness 'til all my striving ceases, and help me to live again another day for Thee." That is our prayer. For now and evermore. Amen.